

WHAT CARBS CAN YOU EAT AND WHEN

Herald Sun · 10 Mar 2021 · 3 · MELISSA MEIER Melissa Meier is a Sydney-based accredited practising dietitian. You can connect with her on Instagram @honest_nutrition

In the world of wellness, carbohydrates have a bad name. Demonised as a nutrient that'll instantly add unwanted weight to your hips and thighs, carbs are often on the list of foods to minimise with good health in mind. Truth is, however, all carbs are not bad for you. In fact, they're an essential component of a healthy, balanced diet. But timing and quality rules the roost.

Carbs aren't only found in bread and pasta – they're widespread throughout foods. You'll find them in all grain foods (think: rice, noodles, quinoa) as well as fruit, dairy and soy alternatives, and starchy veg (like potatoes, corn and legumes). You'll also find them in foods like soft drinks, cakes, pastries, chips and ice cream. Can you tell there are two distinct groups of carbs? (Hint: everyday vs. treats).

The two factors that distinguish good-for-you-carbs from not-so-good-for-you-carbs are the glycaemic index and whether or not something is wholegrain. When you're choosing carbs, you're aiming to tick at least one of these boxes.

The glycaemic index is a measure of the effect of carbohydrates on your blood sugars. Low-GI carbs are found in foods like brown grainy bread, untoasted muesli and sweet potato. These foods are digested slowly and have a gentle effect on your blood sugars. High-GI carbs, like fizzy drinks and crumpets, are digested quickly, which spikes and crashes your blood sugars. While the former leaves you feeling energised, the latter leaves you feeling hungry and lethargic.

If you're going for a grainy food, choose a wholegrain variety. Wholegrains have all three natural layers of the grain, so they're jam packed with fibre and essential micronutrients. Refined grains, on the other hand, have two of the three natural layers of the grain removed, leaving only the starchy component behind, which makes them far less nutrient-dense. Wholegrains are foods like wholemeal bread, rolled oats and brown rice, while refined grains include things like white bread, white rice and pastries. Is there a good time to eat carbs? And when should they be off the menu? The answer is in whether or not at least one of the two boxes above (lowGI and whole-grain) are ticked.

If your carb choices meet either criteria, there's really no bad time to eat them. Those diet rules about no carbs after 5pm are nonsense. You might be surprised to learn that at each and every main meal, good quality carbs should take up about a quarter of your plate. Yes, breakfast, lunch and dinner. With low-GI and/or wholegrain carbs in tow, you've got the bones of a healthy, balanced, satisfying meal.